Interview with Louis Georges Lassonnery, General Manager, Servier South Korea

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Tags: Servier South Korea

You have recently been appointed as General Manager of Servier in South Korea, after coming from several years working in Europe. What perception did you have of the far-way Korean pharmaceutical sector before your arrival?

I did not have much knowledge of the Korean pharmaceutical industry prior to my arrival, and like many others in Europe I had some misconceptions. Of course there was the image of a fast-growing and hard-working society, but for instance I underestimated Korea in terms of its research in the medical field. This has been for me the first and most positive surprise so far. In addition, having lived and worked in both a developing European country like Bulgaria and then in one of the most advanced economies like the Netherlands, I find that South Korea is somewhat of a mix of the two. In the one hand, it is growing fast and there is a lot of commitment and enthusiasm among people, like in Bulgaria. On the other hand, the Korean healthcare system is currently maturing very quickly, so the reasoning is somehow similar to the one we had in the Netherlands and there are common issues like the fast changing and growing cost containment policies. Things simply move much quicker here as a combination of the two!

Servier is a very unique pharma company in many regards, and its approach to globalization is not an exception. How has this applied to South Korea where Servier is present since 1990?

Servier has approached the Korean market in its typical way. We are a company that is not big by our financial figures, but by our human resources and our unique approach to doctors. Servier does not yet play big in South Korea, but we have decided to play very specific in certain domains. For the moment this has brought us success and good levels of growth. However, the next step is to launch several new products in Korea which are going to change the scale of Servier in the country. Though we hope to grow significantly and are adapting to this fast-changing market, we are doing so without losing our distinctive values and image that make Servier.

What kind of growth and development are you aiming at for Servier Korea in this context?

Today Servier Korea is a mid-sized company of 70 people, mainly present in the areas of diabetology and cardiology, for which we will soon be launching new products. We are also going to enter new fields for us in Korea like osteoporosis and depression. So in quantitative terms this should allow us to expand our presence and grow our size. Of course, as general manager one of my key tasks is to take care of the business aspect, but a fundamental part is about developing people within the company. At Servier we highly value offering all our employees interesting careers and opportunities to progress. We consider that we have a duty and a goal which is to develop people, which are also our major resource and competitive advantage vis-à-vis big competitors. And this is also what I find most rewarding and unforgettable. Beyond the financial success in previous postings, what I remember most are the people that I recruited and that have remained a part of Servier. I believe that my predecessors in Korea have been applying this same approach and I wish to continue and enhance it, in the context of a fast-growing company.

What are some of your first impressions about the difference of working with Koreans and how are you applying your management skills in this regard?

My impression is that Korea is a very unique country in Asia, even amongst its most similar neighbors China and Japan. I actually feel that I have been lucky to start my Asian experience in Korea, because I feel that they are the closest to Western culture in the region. They are quite open about their emotions and are incredibly hard workers with drive to succeed. Work is an essential part of Koreans’ lives and I am always surprised at the amount of work they provide everyday. As a country they have achieved so much in a few decades, becoming the 12th largest pharmaceutical market in the world, which is remarkable. I like to be creative in management and indeed managing people is one of the things that I enjoy most in everyday life. I like to challenge people and try different things, for example by applying the same techniques in Korea that I had tried in the Netherlands. Even though culturally here relations are much more hierarchical, it is nice to see that once given the opportunity to participate and bridge opinions, Koreans are quick to take up

the responsibility. It is not about trying to get people to change their culture, but about having them adopt different techniques in order to work better together. By working abroad you can quickly bring down stereotypes and realize that basically people are the same everywhere. You can do certain things to different degrees, but in the end if you value and understand people you can succeed in managing them.

It is often said that Asia is the new hot spot for clinical trials by the leading global companies. Indeed, Servier has one of its 19 International Therapeutic Research Centers in Seoul. How active are you in clinical trials in South Korea?

This centre was open about 2 years ago and now there are 10 people working permanently on development studies. This is Servier's most active research centre in Asia after China, thanks to the high level of interest that Korean doctors have shown in participating in clinical development and to their education standards which are equal to those of the United States and Europe. Moreover, there is a growing trend in Asia requiring local development studies for new products, so the struggle now is even at the level of pre-registration. The process has become even more selective and challenging, so this is another reason why Servier like many others is likely to maintain or increase investments in clinical development.

South Korea is only one among several emerging Asian markets which are also striving to attract resources and investments from headquarters in Europe or the US. In your view, which are the country's main competitive advantages in this regard?

The Korean market has some difficulties, particularly in terms of growing number of different stakeholders pushing their own views on key issues like the cost containment policies. But then this is true in many other countries as well, and the fact is that there is still considerable growth here both in quantitative and qualitative terms to be made. I also have the feeling that this is a country that Servier can understand well and in which we can have fruitful collaborations, as we are already doing with local partners in some activities. We can bring the international perspective while they can provide us a better understanding of local issues. This applies not only to marketing activities, but also to research. In addition, South Korea is a very compact and well connected country where networking makes it possible to get things done quicker than usual.

What are you looking forward to the most in these coming years as head of Servier in South Korea?

I am looking forward to doing something similar to what I achieved in Bulgaria and the Netherlands. This means developing the company based on the successful aspects of the past, all while adapting to the market changes which are affecting not only Korea but the entire world. We need to evolve

in many aspects together with the market and the country, and my task is to make sure that my team understands this and adapts accordingly. Our strategy is to launch in Korea the new products that we have developed through our large investments in R&D and which are available in the Europe, allowing us to take Servier to a new level in the country. We are currently in the Korean registration process, and once that is completed we will have to focus on the pricing aspect and finally on launching aspect, all that will have to be done with and for the medical community and its patients.

What are your ambitions in terms of where Servier Korea should be positioned in 5 years' time?

I can't say for sure what things will be like in 5 years time, but we are working hard on optimizing our teams in Servier Korea. My first ambition is to make a successful launch of our innovative products and make sure that they are well received by the medical community. At the same time I will remain committed to the development of my people and to maintaining the positive image of Servier as a company. By focusing on the key strengths which are the people and products, the rest will come naturally, with hard work and good understanding.

On a personal note, what is it about the pharmaceutical industry that keeps you moving?

Holding both a degree as pharmacist and an MBA in finance, this is a very interesting industry to work in because it requires an everyday use of all that I have learned. It is also a very dynamic and competitive business, with an added dose of complexity due to the multiple stakeholders and intermediaries involved. On the scientific side, we are dealing with very elaborated products with big effects and impact on people's health. So it is a very comprehensive job which never gets boring in which everyday is challenging and you are constantly developing yourself.

What is your final message to the readers of Pharmaceutical Executive?

Sometimes we tend to focus on the difficulties of this industry and on the fact that it is not getting the understanding or recognition that it deserves. Nevertheless, this is part of the challenge that makes it so interesting, and in the end we are helping extend and improve life, which is something we can be proud of.

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